

The concept of MARRIAGE and the FAMILY in Buddhism

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Whether one calls Buddhism a religion or a philosophy, it is a way of life for mankind so that **all beings** who are here and everywhere live in **comfort and security**, without any threat on anybody's account, to their continuance and survival [*sukhino vā khemino hontu sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhittā* Sn. v.143]. Since life in the world is not believed by the Buddhists to be the product of a creation process, all things in this so-called ecosystem, man, bird and beast, including even plant life, must be guaranteed their safe continuance for the collective survival of everything within it. We are glad that the saner scientific outlook of the world today, irrespective of religious creeds, is moving in this direction. Treatises like Biophilia Hypothesis [Ed. Stephen R. Kellert and Edward O. Wilson] provides ample testimony on this.

With this magnanimous outlook on life, Buddhism necessarily looks upon marriage as the one and only bastion on which the healthy and harmonious growth of human life, within the framework of a healthy and harmonious family, could be established. It is within such a framework of thinking that we take up our subject of Marriage and the Family for discussion. Dictionaries generally define marriage as **'the legal union of a man with a woman in order to live together and often to have children.'**

Law and law enforcement, in any part of the civilized world, is part and parcel of the responsibilities of the governing body of a people which goes under the name of state. Any neglect on the part of the state in this area of government reflects its decadence and the need for its replacement. Buddhism as a religious discipline does not step into this territory of law enforcement in the land. But remaining within its legitimate area of **being aware of social propriety and decorum**, Buddhism does constantly remind those who handle statecraft about

this need.

That is why the august person of the Rājā Cakkavatti or Universal Monarch in Buddhism does advise the provincial rulers who come to him seeking instructions as to how they should rule, that they should in their own territories enforce the discipline of the *pañcasīla* or **the five rules of social orderliness**. They are that i. all life in the land should be protected, ii. that all legitimately acquired property of persons should be safeguarded, iii. that there should be propriety and decorum in the sexual behaviour of men and women, iv. that the rule of honesty in word and deed be respected and v. that all in the land must safeguard their sanity of judgement by keeping away from alcohol and drugs.

With regard to marriage too, Buddhism does not concern itself with its legal aspects and implications. Nor does Buddhism play any official part in the marriage ceremonies of the lay community. Some sociologists lament over this non-involvement and mistakenly put forward strange reasons for this. It is amazing that a Sri Lankan sociologist says the following. " For example, virginity and chastity in females are not associated with Buddhist ethics or doctrine; one consequence of this is that marriage is a secular affair in Buddhist Sri Lanka, whereas it is a sacrament according to Brahmanic values." [Gananath Obeyesekera in his *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini* on p. 445]. We have pointed out this criminally serious error and critically examined it elsewhere. [See *Critical Studies on the Early History of Buddhism in Sri Lanka* by Professor Dhammavihari Thera - p.18f. Buddhist Cultural Centre, 2003].

At the same time, in spite of the non-participation of the bhikkhus, i.e. the Buddhist clergy, in the marriage ceremonies of the lay community, the legally and socially / conventionally agreed upon marriages are equally respected in Buddhist communities. A man has to treat respectfully a woman so united with him as his own wife [*sakena dārena ca hohi tuṭṭho* = with thine own wife be content] and *vice versa*. There also seems to have been the possibility for a man to possess as his wife or wives one woman or more in consonance with the legal

or conventional set up of the time. The references such as **'not satisfied with the women in his possession'** [*sehi dārehi asantuṭṭho*], using the word women in the plural, seems to imply that monogamy was not necessarily a compulsory injunction in the Buddhist communities. But the Buddhist ethic of restraint in the gratification of sensual pleasures would unmistakably have had its impact in the area of sex as well.

Buddhist ethics of married life requires honesty on the part of both men and women in their sexual behaviour. Stepping outside the respected and decent limits of their married life is referred to as excess or *aticāra*. Consequent adulterous behaviour is looked down upon as being vulgar. This contemptible extension for the purpose of additional sexual gratification outside one's marriage is noted as being in the direction of **prostitutes** [*sehi dārehi asantuṭṭho vesiyāsu padissati* - Sn. v.108], as well as towards spouses of others [*dissati paradāresu tam parābhavato mukhaṃ* - Ibid.]. Such behaviour is seen to be stigmatized as leading to one's downfall. Or it may result in the licentious use of the **spouses of one's friends and kinsmen** [*yo mittānaṃ sakhānaṃ vā paradāresu dissati*- Sn. v.123]. In all these cases, neither mutual consent nor connivance justifies the treacherous behaviour [*sahasā sampiyena vā taṃ jaññā vasalo iti*. Ibid.]. One cannot but be impressed at the manner in which Buddhism scrutinizes the ethics of wholesome married life.

The basic Buddhist attitude to marriage being so, Buddhists do not seem to permit or condone unmarried mothers or fatherless homes. Far from subscribing. Human nature being what it is, Buddhists texts know of children born out of such promiscuous sexual behaviour. But the harmless poor children born out of such unions of no more than impulsive carnal pleasure seekers on the way side are not to pay the price for the sins of others. Growth of children, growth of both the body and the mind, is to be nurtured with the joint love of a mother and a father. It is known well enough that, at the moment, at least a surrogate mother has to be secured for the nurture of a test tube baby.

It should now be quite clear that Buddhist thinking moves along the line that a cleansed and purified **sense of love** or **attraction in friendship** leads to the union of a man and woman in marriage. The intensity and extension of this genuine and trustworthy love promotes the desire for **the generation of a joint product** in the genesis of a child of their own, out of their own flesh and blood. With the arrival of a child into the midst of people who lovingly looked forward to the event, the birth of the family has begun.

This ennobling treasure of new born babies which nature bestows on humans is not to be scandalously looked upon at anytime as unwanted kittens littered on the roadside. The licentious and promiscuous sexual behaviour currently prevalent in the country today among males and females of all ages and all grades, ranging from school goers to men who more correctly belong to the group called grand parents, produce ill- gotten children in lamentably large numbers. The culture level of a society is to be gauged by the way it receives these new born ones into its midst. The barbaric vulgarity with which professional men and women of the so-called social elite handle illegitimately conceived unwanted babies is disgracefully shocking and ghastly. In the name of divine or earthly human justice who has a right to decide on a newly conceived human baby **as being unwanted** merely because it is the product of a contemptible and unacceptable secretive union of a male and female.

Nobody in this country now seems to worry about the correctness or propriety of such unions, neither in terms of religion nor moral values. Easily available contraceptives and pills safeguard the names and prestige of the actors or dramatist personae of all ages on this stage until the time of conception of a baby. It is then that all the air raid sirens and fire alarms begin to wail and warn. The culprit has by now vanished under the cover of cleverly devised social camouflage of the day. The resulting stench on the entrenched woman's honour has to be minimized and the prestige of the family that begot her has to be safeguarded. This is the vital and major concern of everybody in the town,

educated or uneducated.

The only easy and ingenious way out of it which our pig-headed society knows is abortion, i.e. the brutal dragging out of a mother's womb a human fetus, no matter at what stage of its growth, when pressure and persuasion is brought upon those medical mechanics, accompanied by a gratifying purse, large or small. A heartless Satan scores a bull's eye with the skill of his God given hands. More and more dressed chicken in our super markets and more and more aborted babies in the garbage bins of the abortion clinics in the city of Colombo, known or unknown. Glory be to this culture of the day. We know that the vulgarity and the brutality of this inhuman act of abortion is publicized worldwide. We have seen it with our own eyes in many parts of the world, outside Sri Lanka.

Let us now turn our attention to the homes where the legitimately born children can thrive with a right to live. Here is the family and here is the home. Ideally there shall be **a three tiered family** within this. This is where we shall find a legal union of a man to a woman in order to live together. In the ideally set up home, the family growth is expected to be as follows. In terms of early Buddhist thinking, marriage does not necessarily imply, at least conceptually, the removal of the son from the proximity of his parents. The son brings home a wife. He and his wife live with the husband's parents [*mātā pitā*]. Therefore Buddhist ethics require that a girl, while she is still with her parents, should be taught that one day she has to learn to respect her husband's parents as her own [*sassu-devā*]. Buddhist ethics, specially those dealing with family life, address themselves to this middle group, i.e. the young husband and his wife. They shall respect their parents [*mātā-pitu-upatthāna* | *mātā-petti-bhara*] in the newly set up family home.

The husband shall protect and support his wife and children [*putta-dārassa saṅgaha* Sn. v. 262]. He shall give his wife due respect and enable her to live with dignity in the new home, with recognition and acceptance she deserves within the enlarging family complex. Even in the early Vedic culture, sacrificial prayers were offered to elevate her to this position of a reigning queen in the

midst of her in-laws [*sāmrājñī bhava*]. The Buddha brought about this sublimation, not by sacrifice and prayer but through wise counsel.

A very large segment of Buddhist teachings concerns itself with the proper build up of reciprocal parent-children relationships within this three-tiered family. The young husband, together with his newly wedded wife, looks after his parents with love and care [*mātāpitu-upatthāna Sn. v. 262*] At the same time, he also grooms himself to play the role of a loving dutiful husband and thereafter, in due course, to be the loving father of the children he and his wife beget. Details of this area of parental obligations towards the children are delightfully spelt out under the fourfold aspects of child-care or *satara-saṅgraha vastu* [*cattāri saṅgaha-vatthūni – AN.*].

They are i. provision of adequate food and clothing to one's children: *dāna*, ii. use of loving words in addressing them: *peyyavajja*, iii. providing wise counselling for their guidance in their day to day living: *atthacariyā* and finally iv. wise exercise of emotional mobility or *samānattatā* on the part of parents to handle situations of stress and strain in the lives of their growing up young children [all at AN. I.]. In this same context, parents are advised with a note of cautious warning that in case of failure on the part of parents in the provision of these facilities to their children, they cannot legitimately expect any love or attention from their children [*labhetha mānaṃ pūjaṃ vā na mātā puttakāraṇā* Ibid.].

From all that has been said so far it should be clear to every one that one of Buddhism's major concerns is peace on earth and goodwill among men. And not in a kingdom above. First and foremost, man has to be put right in his own world. He is a product of his own creation. His goodness and his viciousness, his success and his failure, his losses and his gains, all these toss and reel him in life, making him and those around him rejoice and lament, without an awareness of the dividing line between them. This is where humans need to gain or regain their sanity. Urge man to move in this direction. Whosoever among you is capable of helping this human who is groping in the darkness of his own

ignorance, let him lend a helping hand. We shall not be competing to be saviours of others. Whoever shall ever play this role? *Ko hi nātho paro siyā*. Each man must save himself. *Attā hi attano nātho*. Let him make a start. **Ārabhatha**. Set about it. **Nikkhamatha**. And apply himself to it. **Yuñjatha Buddhasāsane**.

